

Thank you all for the chance to say a few words. My name is Ceci Bentler. I'm a mom and run a small home-based business in Billings, and my husband Jim is a physician and the Director of the Emergency Department at St. Vincent hospital. I'm strictly here as a concerned parent. We have 5 children in school district two, a 6th grader, 5th grader, 3rd grader, 1st grader and one starting next year. We are strong believers in the public education system and all our kids go to McKinley Elementary, Billings' oldest and first school.

McKinley is a Title I school with a very diverse socioeconomic and ethnic population. We regard diversity as one of the most important pieces of our kids' education and so we love McKinley Elementary.

Because we love this school so much, for a long time, we've tried to overlook the atrocious state of our buildings, and the packed classrooms, because truthfully, my kids are doing ok. They are being educated by some of the best teachers you can find, but much of their success comes from the fact that besides they have two caring and educated parents, they have warm coats and shoes, a warm home and they always have food to eat. But for 70 percent of the families at our school, public education is their only opportunity to overcome this cycle of poverty. So I think it's time the State took a closer look at what the "funding inequality" looks like to me in Billings.

We are not heavy on teachers, and the teachers in Billings are not getting rich on their salaries. Our district cut 100 teachers in past 4 years, when we added 869 more students. This left us with 90 elementary classes over-accreditation. We can't run bonds to build new, update or expand our buildings, because we don't have the money to staff them. So, then, we're forced to jam kids into these kind of spaces. I've brought some pictures of McKinley. This is a picture of the basement.

Upper left is where my kids took band last year. As you can see, it's a 100 year old concrete hallway entrance to the urinal stalls.

This year we were able to get some of the overcrowding addressed by bussing 2 classes of sixth graders to the Junior High building, and bussing 1 class of kindergarten to another elementary. The classes that were previously being held in the back of the library moved to a classroom. And now band is being held in the even more odd location for band...the library.

The next pictures are how the special needs students get to their resource room. Some of the most at-risk children in Billings are being instructed and cared for in a windowless dungeon in the basement and this appalls me, but we have no space and no money for staff even if we did have the room.

These are the kinds of inequalities I'm talking about. How you all fix this and how this bill shakes out is up to you, but you have to fix this. Give us entitlements per building, or give us increments instead of decrements. Make it work so that it doesn't hurt, but only helps all districts. But this antiquated system is hurting us badly now, and it has to be changed.

Catherine "Ceci" Bentler

Billings, MT

McKinley Elementary: Title I School in Downtown Billings, in a densely populated draw zone



This is a picture of the basement at McKinley Elementary in Billings. We can't build new buildings because we don't have the money to staff them. So we jam them in these spaces. Upper left is where my kids took band last year before we got 2 classrooms back when 6th was moved to Lewis and Clark. Now band is in the Library.

The next pictures are how the special needs students get to their resource room. I'm so thankful for the amazing teachers at SD2 who tolerate these working conditions and still educate kids in smart and innovative ways to deal with this disaster. My kids are fed, have clean clothes, coats and a warm house. But for the 70 percent of poverty families at our school, this isn't the case.

Montana must provide equitable education funding to all districts!

